

There Be Witches by prettyboyporter

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Apologies, But she loves him anyway, Canon-Typical Violence, Fluff, Hopper is dying to fuck up Neil Hargrove, Horror, Hurt/Comfort, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, M/M, Max thinks her brother is an idiot, Nightmares, Recreational Drug Use, Slow Burn, Soft Billy Hargrove, Soft Steve Harrington, Songfic, Supernatural Elements, The Upside Down, Tooth-Rotting Fluff, Witches

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

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Summary:

I have wondered if there be witches in the world - although I cannot believe they come among us now.

-John Proctor, *The Crucible*

John Proctor doesn't know shit. There are clearly witches in this world. I know because I've seen them.

-Steve Harrington, essay for Mrs. Moore's English class

note: this text does not actually appear in the story

1. Chapter 1

Steve shifted from foot to foot in front of his English teacher's desk in the minutes following class, but was equally uncomfortable on each. His palms had been sweating since she handed back his essay with a small, neat "E" written at the bottom and "this has nothing to do with the play" written underneath. That score had tanked his grade by 50 points.

Mrs. Moore looked up at him from her desk, hands folded on top of a pile of papers.

"Mrs. Moore," he said, eyes focused on her empty coffee mug, "I know I haven't been doing so great lately in class."

"No," she stated. "You haven't."

"I mean," he glanced around to ensure the room was empty. "It's just that I've had so much shit going on lately in my life." He twisted his backpack strap between his hands, unsure of how to proceed. He couldn't see explaining away how the memory of sickening, gurgling clicks rasping in his ear kept him up at night. "And now that might be over? I think. I'm trying to get back into this," he gestured to the room, "but I feel kind of ... I don't know. Lost."

"Mr. Harrington, relax," she smiled up at him. "This isn't a confessional, and I'm not going to make you tell me everything. Okay?"

A weight lifted from his shoulders and he nodded.

"These things, though. They make it hard for you to pay attention in class?"

"Yeah," Steve said quietly.

"And do they make it hard for you to sleep at night?" A small crease formed between her eyebrows.

"Yeah, they do. Sorry about falling asleep the last couple days." He paused and placed his fingertips on her desk. "Mrs. Moore, I need

your class to graduate. And I want to pass. Is there anything I can do?"

She flipped open her gradebook and scanned over his scores. "Looks like you started falling off right when we started *The Crucible*." She took off her glasses and looked up at him again, searching his face. Paused and really looked him, as if Arthur Miller had written a play directly across his face. "I'm going to help you, Mr. Harrington," she said decisively. "But you're going to have to do some work for it."

"Awesome," he said, and for the first time in a while, he felt fucking hopeful. He grinned stupidly down at her. "Thank you, Mrs. Moore."

"Don't get too enthusiastic," she said as she stood up, walking over to her tray of extras. "You might not be so happy once you see your pile."

Steve swallowed heavily as he watched her pull out sheet after sheet. Finally she seemed to be satisfied and turned to hand him the stack. "I have some stipulations for you, Mr. Harrington."

"Okay." Steve was bouncing on the balls of his feet. At this point, he'd agree to give up a kidney if it meant he could pass English 12.

"All of this," she placed the pile into his hands, "needs to be completed and turned in by Monday. After you've done this, you need to rewrite that last essay."

"Yeah. I can do that." He eyeballed the pile and thought it was more than fair.

"But I think it's safe you say you have no idea what's even happening," she laid her hand on top of the literature book.

Steve shook his head, a pink embarrassed flush sliding up his neck. "Not really."

It wasn't until she approached him and stood directly in front of him that he realized how small she was. "I'd stay after and help you catch up since I'm usually here for an hour or so, but this week I have an after-school obligation," she said, and wait, Steve thought it was weird that she had *obligations*, that she didn't just live under her desk

like he imagined most teachers do. “But I do have a student aide who will be here helping with my workload after school. He can help get you caught up.”

“Great,” Steve said, shrugging his backpack up over his shoulders. “Who is it?”

“Oh, you probably know him,” she said as she returned to her desk, put on her glasses and picked up a stack of papers to check. “You’re on the basketball team together.”

Steve felt a little dizzy.

“Billy Hargrove.”

~*~

Fifth and sixth periods passed slowly, like time crawled through muck. Steve first made sure to complete all of his work for each class before mentally checking out, drawing a little sketch of Billy Hargrove in his notebook.

The final bell rang, loud and tinny. Steve’s stomach did a little flip, nervous energy vibrating through his body, because this Billy, February Billy, was *different* from the person who beat him bloody on the Byers’ living room floor. He first saw it when Billy smiled at him from across the Winter Bash at the quarry, between partygoers, smoke billowing from lips into the snowflakes. He saw it when Lucas and Max spilled out of the Camaro at school, giggling and delighted. *Later Billy!*, said Lucas, and Max’s didn’t say anything but smiled back over his shoulder. *Smiled*. He heard it when Billy leaned forward in World History and whispered, too close to the skin of Steve’s ear, *Do you think Mr. Harlow is fucking Mrs. Lindy? I bet she *screams**. It was in the jostle from behind during basketball, too hard, too pressing, Billy’s skin slapping against Steve’s back, the hand Billy placed on Steve’s hip lingering longer than necessary.

Billy overwhelmed him at every turn; winking at him in the hallway, tongue sliding out to lick his bottom lip. Flirting. Making balancing equations in Chemistry as lascivious as when his eyes flicked up and

down Steve's body in the showers, smiling before closing his eyes and ducking his head under the stream. Steve started showering at the other end after that for fear of a rogue boner.

Steve jerked himself off on several occasions to images of sweaty, tan skin, a silver necklace resting over Billy's heart, water sliding over taut muscle, and Steve came hard, sliding his other hand over his face and muttering *what the *fuck*, Harrington*.

Steve approached Mrs. Moore's room, dodging students who were slamming lockers and hustling toward the doors. He acknowledged Tommy's *later, dickwad* with a middle finger, then attempted to shake his body loose, jumping up and down a couple times to settle his nerves before ducking into the classroom.

"Mr. Harrington," Mrs. Moore said as she pulled her coral purse from her desk drawer. "I was just about to leave. Mr. Hargrove here should be able to catch you up." She pulled on her puffy tan coat, zipped it up to her neck. "Maybe help him with Act I tonight, Billy?"

Billy smiled slowly, his eyes never leaving Steve's, slick charm in the way he leaned back against the filing cabinet, arms crossed, and said, "Yes, Mrs. Moore. No problem."

Steve cleared his throat and looked down. His heart beat fast as a rabbit's as he slid into a desk, clumsy fingers pulling the backlog of work from his backpack.

Mrs. Moore's boots stopped at the door. She turned. "Lock up for me, Billy?"

Billy grabbed a textbook and slid a desk flush against Steve's. "Yes, ma'am," he said.

"Have a good night, boys. Leave any work you finish on my desk before you leave, okay?"

"Okay." Steve's voice cracked.

She got a couple feet before turning again. "And Mr. Harrington? Do try to get some rest tonight."

“Yeah. Will do.”

They were silent until the clack of her boots faded down the hall.

“Not getting enough sleep, Harrington?” Billy said, eyes fixed on Steve’s face.

“Not really,” Steve said quietly as he pulled the first worksheet from the packet.

“And what is it that keeps the king awake at night?” Billy asked, opening the textbook.

Steve flicked the corner of his worksheet against his desk. Thought carefully before answering. “Monsters.”

Billy huffed a laugh once, dryly. “Yeah. Yeah me too.”

~*~

“It’s about a group of teenage girls who got caught dancing naked in the forest,” Billy declared once they got down to business. He flung his arm over the back of Steve’s chair, stating this in a low, conspiratorial tone. He leaned in close. “And they get caught by their uncle. I mean, could you imagine walking through the woods to find this group of beautiful, sheltered, naked girls just begging for something different from their repressed lives? Something wild?”

Steve took a deep breath. Billy wanted to push, so Steve would push back. He moved even closer to Billy, and while he didn’t possess the raw sexual energy that Billy exuded, he certainly knew how to charm. He pulled out his best smirk and tilted his head closer, close enough to see the dark blond stubble along Billy’s jaw . “I’m a polite young man. I think I’d have to help them out.”

Billy huffed. “Yeah?” He leaned in as if Steve were a magnet, half an inch, just enough, his eyes dropping to Steve’s lips.

“Hargrove?”

“Hm?”

Steve quirked an eyebrow. "Is this play really just about some naked chicks?"

Billy smiled and pulled back. "That's the instigating event. But that's not really what it's about. The witch trials are just a front. It's an allegory for McCarthyism."

"A what for what now?"

And that launched Billy into the plot, into the meat and bones of the first act. He took his time explaining the events, characters, and motives. The minutes ticked by quickly, one hour becoming two as they went over passages, Billy pointing out the important quotes, with occasional silent pauses as Steve filled in his worksheets.

Some time later, Steve dropped his pencil, massaging his right hand firmly. "Fuck, my hand's cramping."

Billy hovered over Mrs. Moore's desk, collecting a stack of papers that she'd apparently left for him. "Looks like you made a little dent there," he nodded at Steve's pile.

"Four down. A million to go." Suddenly, a wall of exhaustion slid over Steve. He yawned and stretched widely. The clock read 5:13pm.

Billy reclined against the filing cabinet, flipping through the papers in his hand. His jacket was still strewn over a desk, and he made no attempt at packing up for the night.

Steve leaned forward on his desk. "Hey. What are you up to for the next few hours?"

Billy shrugged. "Nothing really."

A blazing, brilliant idea struck Steve. "Wanna come over my place? We could order pizza. Get some more work done. My parents are in Detroit for the week, some bullshit deal my dad's trying to make with car companies. I have the place to myself, and I don't want to fall asleep right away. You could help keep me awake."

Billy grinned, and his smile reached all the way up to his eyes, eyes that reminded Steve of Lake Michigan in July, burning bright and

hot. Steve thought maybe, just maybe, he was royally fucked. “Thought you’d never ask, sweetheart.”

~*~

Steve didn’t realize how famished he actually was until he devoured his fourth piece of pizza, sitting across from Billy as they sat cross-legged on the living room floor, pizza laid out between them on the coffee table. “Hey,” he said between bites, “how’d you end up as Moore’s aide, anyway?”

Billy swallowed and huffed a laugh. “Dumbass like me can’t be an aide, huh?”

“That’s not what I meant, Jesus. Just that, I don’t know, it’s not very,” he waved at Billy in general, “cool, or whatever.”

Billy took a minute to answer, wiped his fingers off on a napkin. “This shit’s easy for me. English, I mean. I’m good at reading between the lines. Plus there’s a lot of bullshitting, you know? And those, amigo, are two areas where I excel.”

Steve nodded and reached for a fifth piece.

“Moore says she likes my writing,” Billy continued with a shrug. “So I help her out a few times a week. Check papers, edit essays. She sends home a glowing note to my old man once a week, and he stays the fuck off of my case for a night or two.”

His dad hits him, Max had confessed to Steve when she slid out the back door behind him at the Byers’. A minute before, Billy had just stopped Steve to say Happy New Year, Harrington in the kitchen. She removed her Happy New Year 1985! hat as she looked up at Steve, the snow and cold muffling her soft, whispered words. And he yells at him. I heard him call Billy a faggot. Said that Billy was sick. And, she looked down at her boots, blue eyes watering, you won’t tell, right? I heard a big crash then saw it from the hallway. The door was cracked and ... Billy was crying on the floor. Neil was standing in over him. His stuff was everywhere. I don’t know what to do. I - I had to tell someone.

Steve swallowed heavily, making his lips jerk up in a smile. “Then

you both get something out of it. Pretty cool.”

“As cool as checking papers can get,” Billy said.

They fell back into silence after eating as Steve set to completing the last assignment for the first act, and Billy worked on grading. He remembered Max’s face on New Years Eve, how her chin trembled as tears spilled, and Steve pulled her in to hold her that night. *You did the right thing, Max*, he’d told her, his cheek pressed to the top of her head.

Steve stole glances at Billy, seeing the yellowish faded bruises around Billy’s forearm when the cuff of his sleeve slid up. A fine, thin, silvery scar, about two inches long, hid under Billy’s stubble under his jaw. Billy focused on the papers, diligently reading over each before labeling each with a score.

“You should be a teacher,” Steve commented.

Billy’s head jerked up and he gave one loud barking laugh before he doubled over, shaking with maniacal giggles, tears streaming from the corners of his eyes. Steve couldn’t help but join in, but had been totally serious in his assessment.

“Of all the fuckin’ ridiculous things to say, Harrington,” Billy said as he tried to catch his breath, “that one takes the goddamn cake. Me, a teacher? Have you met me?”

“I’m not lying, man,” Steve said, his tone sliding from humor to seriousness. “You helped me out a lot tonight.”

“Helps when you’re hot for teacher, huh?”

“Got it bad, so bad” Steve said, trying not sound too serious because *jesus christ* he was in trouble.

“Hmmm,” Billy said as he straightened up and met Steve’s eyes. One moment ticked by, two, three, and Billy still held Steve’s gaze. His fingers twitched on the table.

“Do you want,” Steve started to say, somehow lost his words and found them again. “Do you want a beer?”

Billy's eyes flicked up to the clock. "Nah. I should probably get home. Curfew and all." He stood and started packing the up papers.

Steve walked him to the door, felt nervous, like he was on a date, like he wasn't sure if he was supposed to lean in to kiss Billy or just shake his hand or give an awkward nod.

Billy solved that problem, turning to face Steve in the open doorway. "Hey, uh, want to do this again tomorrow? You have to do the work for the second act. I can help again. I mean, if you want."

"Yeah," Steve hoped his grin wasn't too fucking cheesy. "Sounds great. Want to just come straight here after school? Comfier than sitting in a desk."

Billy stepped back onto the porch, walking backward. "See you tomorrow then, King Steve," Billy said with a wink, breath steaming in the cold winter air. He climbed in his Camaro, revved the engine once and sped off into the night.

Steve sighed deeply in his doorway, closed the door, and fell back against it. He wiped a hand down his face. "Fuck."

~*~

Steve awoke with a start, dripping sweat as he fought to catch his breath. The clock read 3am. He could still hear the voice in from his dream. "What dost thou want?" a woman asked, her words sibilant and dripping with a dangerous sweetness. A large, ancient volume with yellowing pages floated before him, each page filled with signatures in black ink. "Thou shall have sleep and live thy life without torment of otherworldly demons. Wouldst thou like *him*?. He shall belong to thee, and thou shall enjoy the pleasures of his flesh." A vision of Billy slid into view, naked in Steve's bed on his stomach, all smooth skin, legs slightly parted, beckoning. Steve's dick twitched, aching, and he felt a ghostly pressure sliding along the length of it, the pressure making him moan. Billy turned on his side and whispered, "Love you, baby."

"Sign thy name," a male voice whispered. The book floated closer as

a haggard black goat drawn across one tattered page sharpened into focus. "I shall guide thy hand," he said.

Steve sat bolt upright in his bed, his chest heaving, covered in come and sweat. He tried to pull himself together, counted out loud between shaky breaths to calm himself, changed his sheets, and showered. He spent the rest of the night pacing and watching the clock.

~*~

Steve walked sluggishly the next morning into English and slumped into a desk. Two rows over, Billy muttered, "Jesus. Harrington." Billy glared at the boy in the seat next to him and hissed, "I need this desk. Fuck off." The boy scurried away, and Billy glanced back to Steve. "Look at you. Get up. You're sitting right here." Billy pulled the desk closer to him and patted the chair. Steve got up and took the seat.

Throughout class, every time Steve felt his eyes start to get heavy, Billy shifted next to him - would accidentally kick the leg of his desk, elbow his side and mutter "oops", jostle his arm and to say, "hey Harrington, can I borrow a pen?"

Steve made it through and even managed to take some notes and complete the day's work, not sure if he'd have been able to do so without Billy's foot tapping against his own. The bell rang and Billy leaned close. "The fuck? Did you not sleep or something?"

"Bad dream," Steve said, his voice sounding harsh to his own ears with lack of sleep.

"Must have been one shitty dream. Stay right here."

Billy walked over to Mrs. Moore's desk and leaned over, whispering to her, eyes sliding to Steve. She glanced over quickly then looked back up to Billy, nodded, and left the classroom.

A couple minutes later she returned, a large mug of piping coffee in hand. She set in on Steve's desk. "You did good work last night, Mr. Harrington," she stated with a small smile. "Keep it up and you'll be passing by the end of the week." Her heels clicked as she returned to

her desk.

"Thanks Mrs. Moore," he said as he took a sip and savored the warmth sliding down his throat.

"Don't thank me," she said as she began pulling completed work from the tray. "Thank your friend."

Maybe he was delirious. Maybe he was in love. Maybe a bit of both. "Is that what you are, Hargrove?" He took another sip. "My friend?"

"Yeah," Billy said, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Yeah, I'd say so."

~*~

Back at the house, Steve drank an entire pot of coffee. Billy was relentless in keeping Steve awake and focused, even resorting to singing parts of the play's dialogue to the tune of *Immigrant Song*, which Steve thought was equally amusing and fucking adorable. By six, thanks in no small part to Billy's heroic efforts, Steve finished the work for the second act, his brain still processing adultery and vengeance, passion and iciness, jealousy and justice.

Billy took it upon himself to make mac and cheese for dinner, showing himself around Steve's kitchen despite Steve's protest that he could just order them pizza again. "I do it for Max all the time since Susan started working later," Billy said. Steve felt lazy as he watched Billy work, boneless with exhaustion and somehow content. Complete. Billy pulled the pan from the oven with towels and a soft "ah, fuck!" as he set it down on top. Something absolutely insane formed in Steve's mind, an image of Billy pulling dinner from the oven in a different setting, decades older, shorter hair, some grey hair streaking through the blond strands, in a different state, sun streaming through large windows.

Steve couldn't figure out how to say that thought, wasn't sure if he really wanted to just yet, so he mumbled, "I like this," and gestured at Billy.

"You're a hell of a lot nicer than Max, that's for sure," Billy said as he

scooped their dinner onto plates.

“You’d make a good wife,” Steve said as he dug in.

“And you sound like you’re fuckin’ drunk,” Billy laughed and nudged Steve’s foot under the table, nudged it but left his foot there resting against Steve’s. It felt like there was a nerve connected directly from Steve’s foot to his dick, and he wondered how someone could get so turned *on* by a foot. He leaned down to eat, and if his foot moved against Billy’s because of it, then. Oops.

They finished dinner, and Steve mustered it up to clear the plates and load them in the washer. He yawned and stretched.

Billy pulled a beer from the fridge and leaned against it, drinking deeply. “You’re still looking sleepy, Harrington. Wanna play some ball? Get your blood pumping?” He gestured to the net behind the house.

“Okay. Get prepared to have your ass handed to you, Hargove.”

“Ooo. Tough words coming from that pretty mouth.”

Steve licked his lips and leaned forward, kissing the air a couple of inches in front of Billy’s mouth. Billy stood bewildered for a moment as Steve pushed away from the countertop and retrieved his pullover hoodie, heading for the back door.

~*~

Talk was about all Steve had in him. Exhausted, he tried to keep up with Billy, but Billy controlled the ball for the majority of the time, dribbling and dodging as Steve made half-hearted attempts at swatting the ball from Billy’s hands.

Eventually, Billy just tossed the ball to Steve and let him shoot free throws and layups, collecting the rebounds and relaying them back. Steve was about to shoot when a dark shadow moving at the edge of the garage caught his eye.

The ball fell from Steve’s hands, bouncing on the ground as the

shadow moved into the cone of light thrown from the lamp on the front of the garage. Hooves clacked on concrete as a hulking goat with matted black fur stalked towards him. It stopped about four feet from him, peering up with beady brown eyes. Its gnarled grey-black horns curved back in a perfect arch, coming to sharp points at their ends.

"What the fuck," Billy muttered and walked closer. The goat didn't move. "Uhm, Steve? Is it just me or is that thing staring at you?"

"Yeah. Yeah I think it is," Steve said, bewildered. The goat's nostrils flared as it stepped even closer. The hairs on Steve's arms stood on end. A heavy, sickening aroma of sulphur filled his nose.

Majesty, said a sibilant voice in the back of his mind. *Wouldst thou like to fly amongst the tallest trees?*

Fear clenched up in his stomach, bile hot and putrid rising in his mouth. He started walking backwards. His palms began sweating and he doubled over, clutched his stomach, and puked.

Billy rushed over and placed a hand on Steve's back. "You okay?" he asked.

Steve wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I need to call Hopper." The goat's beady eyes never left Steve's face.

"Hopper?" Billy asked, his voice raised a pitch, etched with a touch of panic. "Why Hopper?" Billy started to stalk forward towards the goat, but Steve stopped him with a hand on his forearm.

"Because he's the one who will actually listen," Steve looked at Billy, who started to get fidgety. "It's okay, Billy. Hopper's fine. Trust me."

Of course, by the time Hopper arrived, the goat had disappeared, seemingly back into the forest or from whatever hellhole it had escaped. Steve found that exhaustion had loosened his tongue, and he told Hopper everything: about the dream, the voice, the book, the lack of sleep, a general description of temptation (Billy was listening, after all), and the black goat. "Do you think it could be related to - to what happened a few months ago?"

"Kid, normally I'd say it's just teenage hormones keeping you up and that one of Merrill's goats must have cut and run, but we both know things aren't quite that easy anymore." Hopper pulled his hat off his head and sat back heavily in his chair.

"What should I do?" Steve asked.

Hopper considered for a moment. "I'll bring El out here tomorrow during the daylight. See what she gets. Until then, you got another place you can stay tonight?"

Steve shrugged. "I can get a room."

Hopper nodded. "Go to the Motel 6 off of Thirteen. And call me if anything strange pops up." He turned to Billy. "Can you stay with him tonight, Hargrove?"

"Yes sir," Billy said.

"Good. Need me to call your dad? Tell him you're staying at a friend's and that I'll make sure you're in school tomorrow?"

"No," Billy looked panicked. "I mean, better if he just doesn't know at all."

Hopper's jaw twitched and he flexed his fingers, like he was saving some type of electricity and was waiting for the excuse to light into Neil Hargrove. "Okay. No calls. Now go get some rest. And, y'know, don't linger around here too long. Don't go out there trying to put on a one-man show with that bat," he gave Steve a pointed glare. "And make sure you're both in school tomorrow."

"We will. Hey, say hi to El," Steve said as Hopper walked to the door.

"She misses you, you know. Something about bitchin' hair," Hop got a warm look on his face before he climbed up in the Blazer and rolled down the window. "Now get *out* of here."

Steve and Billy watched him drive off. "What was all that?" Billy asked. "He's really that concerned about a goat?"

Steve blew out a long breath. "It's a long goddamn story."

“Sounds like we got some time tonight, pretty boy. Go pack your bag.”

~*~

The only room left at the motel had one small bed and Billy jumped right on it, patting the spot next to him as he pulled a baggie of weed from his pocket. Steve was convinced that Billy Hargrove beckoning him on a small bed with a bag of weed was a more beautiful visual than the time he'd seen Seurat's pointillist painting at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Steve rolled the joint and lit up, passing it over to Billy as he held in the smoke, savoring the burn. Billy leaned heavily against Steve's shoulder as he inhaled. “Fuckin’ strange night,” Billy said, voice strained from retaining smoke in his lungs.

“Mmm. Yeah,” Steve said as he pulled away to shrug off his jacket. “But I’ve seen stranger.”

Billy did the same, pulling off his leather coat and boots. “I guess that’s why you carry that around,” he pointed to Steve’s nail-studded bat propped against the nightstand.

Steve took another drag. “A lot of crazy shit has happened in Hawkins, starting with Will Byers.”

“Little quiet kid? The one who has a crush on me?”

“That’s the - wait, how do you know that?”

Billy just grinned. “Sometimes, pretty boy, you just *know*. I’ll explain it to you when you grow up someday. Now, with the Byers kid. Please continue.”

A little high, a little tired, and feeling far too weighted, Steve revealed the story to Billy. He told him about picking up Jonathan Byers’ bat and using it to smack around a Demogorgon, how Jonathan lit the fucking thing on fire. How Nancy was one of the best shots he knew. How a little girl named Eleven wandered into their lives. How he clutched Dustin to his chest in an alternate dimension

and braced him tightly while thinking *this is the part where we die*.

“Fuck,” Billy said, eyes bloodshot and glassy, leaning heavily against Steve’s shoulder, the single spot of contact so warm. “Are you shitting me?”

“Wish I was,” Steve said. “I wish it was all a lie.” His limbs felt so heavy. His eyes felt like weights. He tried to stay awake, tried to savor the feeling of Billy pressing closer against his side, but he faded out. He drifted off to the feeling of Billy’s fingers pushing the hair from his forehead.

It was a dreamless night for Steve. Not once did he wake with voices whispering or Demodogs clicking in his ear. He ended up with his chest pressed tightly against Billy’s back, his arm flung over Billy’s side. He slept soundly, peacefully, for the first time in a long while.

While he slept, his hand found its way over Billy’s heart.

The clock showed 3am. Outside the room’s window, a hulking black goat stood under the flickering yellow sphere of light. Its gaze was fixed on the curtains.

2. Chapter 2

Steve woke while the sun was still asleep in the Indiana winter, still not quite ready to rise. It was 5am according to the clock on the nightstand. The bed next to him was disappointingly empty, but then the toilet flushed and Billy emerged from the bathroom already wearing his boots and jacket. "Sorry," he said, and sat on the side of the bed and faced Steve. "Didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't," Steve said as he slid back against the headboard. "Just woke up a minute ago."

"How'd you sleep?"

"Like a baby," Steve said, and while he was still sleepy, he wasn't exhausted. It was the best night of sleep he'd had in recent memory. "You should sleep in my bed every night. Like my very own personal giant teddy bear."

"Harrington," Billy said, reaching over to clasp Steve's ankle. "I am *not* a fuckin' *teddy bear*."

Steve leaned forward and tried to look like he meant serious business, poking Billy in the chest with each word. "You. Are. My. Giant. Golden. Teddy. Bear."

Billy smiled and the tip of his tongue poked out from between his teeth. His eyes flicked to the clock. "I hate to cut and run, but I need to go home before school. This argument ain't over, pretty boy." Slowly, Billy pulled his hand from Steve's ankle and pushed up from the bed.

Steve wavered for a second before asking, "Think you'll get in trouble?"

Billy paused with his hand on the knob. His thumb ran over it, and he looked quietly at his boots before saying, "We'll see."

Steve didn't see Billy in the halls for the first two periods of the day. He wasn't in third period, either, their first shared class. Five minutes into fourth period, Mrs. Moore's class, Billy finally appeared. He sat down in the desk next to Steve slowly and gingerly. Steve didn't miss the look on Mrs. Moore's face, fleeting concern, before she continued on with the lesson.

"You okay?" Steve leaned over and whispered.

"I'm fine," Billy said with a smile and wink.

But Steve could tell it was just bullshit. It was *different* from his normal flirtation, like he was pulling on a mask. Billy took out his notebook quietly and started writing, as if it was any other day, doing bellwork, classwork, taking notes, pen moving along as he sat so still.

The bell rang. Mrs. Moore walked up to Billy's desk with a raised eyebrow. Billy smiled up at her, all charm, tore out his classwork from his notebook and handed it over to her. "Ma'am," he said, his voice full of honey, lingering eye contact, laying it on thick.

She wasn't having it. "Want to tell me what happened, Billy?"

And that's when Steve noticed it - the quick shift to the left in Billy's eyes that he did right before he was about to tell a lie. "Fell down in the parking lot this morning. Didn't see the black ice, I guess."

"Well, gentlemen, if I can ever help you," she looked at Steve, "with whatever is behind the sleepless nights, or you," she looked at Billy, "with the black ice, please, allow me to do so. I might be nothing more than a teacher in this world, but I do know people who are *very* helpful. Mr. Harrington, can I expect your work from Act Three on Monday?"

"Yes ma'am," Steve said, handing over the work that he'd completed yesterday.

She stepped back and looked at them both. "If I can't help you, I'm happy that at least you're helping each other," she said and returned to her desk.

"Come on. Come with me," Steve said and picked up his backpack. Billy slowly got up and followed.

Steve led them to the closest restroom and walked them into a stall, latching the door behind Billy. He leaned against the opposite wall. "Will you show me?"

Billy's hands balled into fists, fire flashing across his eyes. Steve was relatively sure that he would no longer be an object of Billy's anger, but he planted his feet all the same. After a few tense moments, Billy unclenched his fists and jammed up his shirt on his left side.

There was an angry red welt across Billy's left ribs.

"What-" Steve started, but couldn't make the question happen, stuttering on his lips. "What-"

Billy tore his eyes from where they were fixed over Steve's shoulder to his face. "Monsters," he said quietly.

Steve nodded and slid his foot closer. He touched his sneaker to the side of Billy's boot, an imitation of their touch from dinner last night at Steve's table. Time slowed around them, the muffled sounds of slamming lockers and shouting students sounding a million miles away as the world narrowed to just them in the stall as Steve rubbed his foot against Billy's, to their singular point of contact. To the comfort Steve gave Billy in silence.

At least you're helping each other.

~*~

Steve wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, guarding the boy behind him who was trying to break free from Steve's defence. His shoes squeaked on the gym floor as the ball came his way, and he used his height to snatch the ball from the air before it made its way to the boy. Quickly he passed the ball to Billy, who was hovering unnoticed near the sideline. Billy barreled toward the basket, bouncing it between his legs once before jumping up to sink

the shot. “Whoo!” Billy shouted, coming over to slap Steve’s hand before reaching down to give his ass one hard smack. “Nice pass, King Steve!”

Steve grinned and hoped that the sting on his asscheek wouldn’t lead to a wayward boner.

During the next break in play, he glanced over to see Hopper hovering in the gym’s entrance. Hopper looked at Steve and nodded once to the hallway. Steve tugged on Billy’s t-shirt. “Come on, teddybear,” he said with a smile.

Billy rolled his eyes. “*Not* a fuckin’ teddy bear,” he said, but happiness edged his protestation.

Hopper led them a few feet from the doors, glancing around. He seemed to deem the hall clear enough of students before pointing to Billy and saying, “How much does he know?”

Steve rubbed the back of his neck. “I, uh. I told him everything.”

Hopper’s eyebrows shot up. “Everything? Jesus, Steve.” He sighed and shook his head at the ground. His words dripped with annoyance. “Okay, fine. I guess he already knows that he can’t tell anyone?”

“I guess we can stop talking about him like he isn’t right the fuck here,” Billy sneered.

“Hey, *watch it*, kid,” Hopper said. “I get it. You’re all full of piss and vinegar and you’re tragically misunderstood, but I have a kid to protect, and the more people know about her, the more nervous I get. Now do you think you can keep your mouth shut?”

“Now in that area, amigo, I am truly an expert.” Billy smirked.

“Good,” Hopper said, letting out a long breath. He turned back to Steve. “I brought El out to your house today. She thinks there’s someone attempting to open a rift to the Upside Down. Don’t know if they’re trying to get in or let something out or,” he waved in the air, “maybe both. But they’re having a hard time. Like they’re trying to scratch through concrete with a nail. She thinks they’re looking for

some type of jackhammer to get them through.” He looked pointedly at Steve.

Steve’s stomach dropped and everything started to spin. “Shit. Am - am I the jackhammer?”

“Yeah, kid,” Hopper said slowly, sadly. “You are.”

Steve’s eyes slid closed. “Fuck.” Several beats of silence passed as he processed this. “What are we gonna have to do, Hop?”

“Come back tonight. We’ll have Joyce, Jonathan, Nancy and El there. And bring Billy, too. We don’t know what we’re up against, so we could use the extra help.”

“Are you fucking insane?” Billy spat. “You - you want, what, to use Steve as *bait*?” He stepped closer to Steve’s side, panic edging his voice at the last word.

“I don’t like it, either. But Steve is who they seem to want. We don’t know why they want in, we don’t know who or what they are, but we know that Steve is apparently their key. If we want to have any kind of chance at beating them, we have to,” Hopper glanced at Steve, his eyes soft, “we have to dangle the key.”

Hopper walked away with an assurance from Billy and Steve that they would both go straight to Steve’s from school. Steve must have looked like a fucking mess, because Billy looked around at the empty hall and pulled Steve against him, hugging him tight. “You’ll be fine, Harrington,” he whispered, and Steve held Billy close, tried to let the embrace settle his heart hammering in his chest.

~*~

The first thing they did at Steve’s house was to raid the garage for supplies. Steve laid out a large tarp and they loaded it up with whatever they thought would come in handy: chains, ropes, a crowbar, two axes, three gas cans which Joyce later took to the gas station to fill, and a chainsaw, “because Ash Williams is sexy fuckin’ badass,” Billy said.

While dragging the tarp and its contents down the hall, Billy suddenly dropped his end in front of Steve's dad's study, staring inside with wide eyes. He pointed to the wall adjacent to the desk, and stated, "I need *that*." Mounted there was a machete with a simple, dark brown handle, almost two feet in length. It widened about halfway through with a graceful curve that swooped up into a point at the end.

"A gift for my dad from one of his business partners," Steve said. "Brought it back from Guatemala." Billy wandered in the study and plucked it down from the wall, held it in his hand and examined one side, then flipped it to examine the other. He held it forward and swung it fiercely back and forth, the swoosh of it making him smile, and yeah, Steve thought, Billy was *born* to hold a machete. "I don't think he'll miss it. He's not knocking back the jungles of Hawkins or anything."

"I dig it," Billy said with a smile on his lips, holding the blade aloft, affection and admiration in his eyes.

"Come on, bushmaster," Steve said as he picked up the tarp again. "Let's get this stuff ready."

They took their haul to the kitchen near the sliding glass doors. Joyce arrived with a casserole and bags of potato chips within an hour, followed closely by Nancy and Jonathan, who had a pistol, a rifle, shells, bottles of rubbing alcohol, rags, and lighters in the trunk.

A pile of kids spilled out of Jonathan's car. Dustin, Lucas, Will, Max, and Mike argued loudly as they retrieved sleeping bags, pillows, and backpacks from the trunk. "Heard you might need some help this weekend," Dustin said with a wide grin. "Eleven told the Chief that we should come, and he was like," Dustin put on his best Hopper voice and pinched the bridge of his nose, "*ugh, fine, kid*, so he called our parents and told them we're having a weekend-long campaign."

Steve was irritated and overjoyed all at once. "Fine, I guess, if that's what he says. Come in guys." The army of small nerds trailed past him and he showed them to a guest room upstairs where they could put down all their things. He noticed that Will stared three seconds too long at Billy in the kitchen when they walked past, flushing pink

when Lucas gave him a little nudge and said, “Come on, Will.” *There it is*, Steve thought.

Hopper and Eleven were the last to show up somewhere around 7pm. “Hi Steve,” she said quietly up to him, her hair now brushing her shoulders, curling adorably.

“Hey kiddo,” Steve said. He resisted the urge to squeeze the hell out of her, not sure how she handled affection yet. She walked past him, past her friends who rushed over to greet her, and went straight for the kitchen. Steve watched, curious, too far away and surrounded by too much of the kids’ noise to hear what transpired.

She stopped in front of Billy and looked up. Steve saw Billy glance down at her and say *hi*, his face bewildered and a bit guarded. She reached over, took his hand in hers, and tugged. He took the cue and went down on one knee in front of her, meeting her at eye level.

She leaned forward, placed her hands on his shoulders, and said something close to Billy’s ear. His eyebrows knitted together and he pulled back sharply, looking at her face.

Eleven didn’t let go of his shoulders and spoke again. Billy’s head dropped a bit and he gazed off, his face softening. Several moments went by and they stayed like that, with her hands looking small on his shoulders and with him looking off with an expression half sad, half fond. She spoke one more time, and whatever she said made a slow, happy smile appear on Billy’s face. He said something back to her, and she nodded. He placed his hand on top of hers.

Eventually she let go of Billy, giving him a small smile before turning away. She paused next to Steve as she exited the kitchen. “Better together,” she said, and glanced back at Billy. She went to join her friends in the living room and they pounced on her like eager puppies.

Billy pushed himself to his feet and leaned back against the island, hands on the counter. He had a small frown on his face. Steve entered the kitchen, pulled two beers from the fridge and handed one to Billy. “What did she have to say?” Steve asked as he popped open the can and drank.

Billy drank long and hard, downing half the can before saying, "Said I looked like my mom - 'beautiful'. Max showed her some photo album - a picture of her holding me as a baby."

"Yeah?"

Billy finished his drink. "Said she touched the picture and saw us in bed. That you and I are *good*."

Steve smiled. "Yeah. I guess she didn't grow up around people, so she doesn't talk a lot. Doesn't have a big vocabulary. But she's a loyal kid."

They fell silent for a moment.

"I never said it, you know," Billy said.

"Said what?"

"That I'm sorry." He looked over at Steve.

"You don't have to. I mean. I already know."

Billy set his can down on the counter and stood directly in front of Steve. "Yes, I do. It wasn't even about you, and every time I looked at your face I felt sick. So. I'm sorry, Steve. I wish I never touched you."

Steve clasped his hand on Billy's shoulder. "I forgave you a long time ago," Steve said as Billy stepped in to Steve's space to pull him into a hug. They stayed like that in silence for several long moments. Out of the corner of his eye, Steve saw Will start to walk into the kitchen but halted at the sight of them and watched, looking startled at first, then curious and embarrassed. Steve didn't pull away; he let Will watch as he held Billy, showing him comfort and love.

Will backed away eventually, pink, and wearing a little grin.

After settling in and congregating in the living room, the chit chat died down, and Hopper stated, "Well. Guess it's time." They each picked up a weapon and slid out the back door, around the pool, and faced the border of the forest, gathering in two lines. Billy held his machete and Steve carried his bat. Up front they were flanked by

Jonathan, Nancy, Hopper, and Joyce, while the kids stood behind them. Billy swung his machete back and forth nervously. "Calm down, Hargrove," Hopper said to him, but still looked a little shaky himself behind his carbine.

Eleven emerged next to Steve and looked up. "Come with me," she said, and took his hand. They walked forward towards the line of trees standing tall and menacing in the dark winter night. She looked back over her shoulder. "Stay here," she said to the rest of them.

"Like fuck I'm staying," Billy said and started to walk forward.

Eleven turned to Billy. "Stay. Here," she said forcefully.

Billy took another step forward.

"Billy. Listen to her. I'll be fine," Steve said, and gave him a nod. "Really. Do as she says."

Billy swung his machete again, but eventually took a step back into his spot next to Hopper. "Fine," he said, but apparently still needed to get some vitriol out. He turned to look at Jonathan holding the chainsaw on the other side of him. "You *wish* you could be as sexy as Ash Williams with that thing."

"Yeah? Well you kind of *do* look like Jason Voorhees with that," Jonathan said back, and the kids behind them erupted into giggles. Even Billy laughed.

"Guys," Joyce warned, holding up a pistol, because Steve and Eleven were making their way into the treeline.

Steve missed their reassuring presence as he and Eleven moved into the line of trees, virgin snow crunching underfoot as they made their way deeper, deeper into the woods that took Barb, where Demodogs hid. He felt his heart beating in his throat and his breathing became labored. He inhaled and exhaled slowly, forcing his attention on the warmth of Eleven's hand in his own.

She stopped suddenly and removed her hand. Her eyes slid closed. Silence fell around them as she concentrated. Steve kept his guard up, giving the bat a good twirl and holding it up, scanning the trees

for any type of threat. The only sound was that of snow occasionally falling from a branch to the forest floor around them.

After several agonizing minutes, Eleven opened her eyes. She was shaking a little. "They're not here."

"They're not? Should - should we wait?"

Eleven shook her head. "Not tonight. They said, tomorrow. You. Tomorrow"

"Did you see them?" Steve asked, still trembling, unable to stop himself from searching and turning in a shaky circle, but ready to swing.

"Yes," she said, her voice quivering.

"What are they like?" Steve asked, her tone drawing him back to put his hand on her shoulder.

"They are bad," was all she stated, but the haunted look in her eyes told him all he needed to know.

~*~

"Not tonight, apparently," Steve said to everyone when they emerged from the trees. "They told El tomorrow."

"Christ," Hopper said and stepped forward to tug Eleven close to him, holding her against his side.

Billy walked toward Steve as everyone turned to walk into the house behind Eleven, trying to glean more information. "You okay?" Billy asked.

"Yeah," Steve said. "Eleven seemed shaken, though. Not sure what we'll be up against tomorrow."

"Don't care if it's a team of Freddy Krueger, Jason, and Michael Myers all at once. I got you, pretty boy," Billy said as he stepped forward and touched his forehead briefly against Steve's.

Steve felt his cheeks warm. “Let’s go inside. How am I gonna sleep tonight without my teddy bear?”

“Fuck you, Harrington,” Billy said with a laugh.

Bickering about bedrooms filled the house as Steve slid open the glass door. Dustin and Lucas put up (and lost) a brief but passionate argument that *everyone* should sleep in one room. The boys settled in the master bedroom. Max and Eleven took the guest bedroom with Jonathan and Nancy setting up camp on the floor next to them, while Joyce and Hopper opted for the two couches in the living room.

In his own room, Steve climbed in his bed next to Billy and wondered how he’d ever be able to live without this every single night. Now that he knew the way Billy’s blue eyes raked over his body as he slid in bed. Now that he’d felt the warmth of Billy’s skin at night. He felt hot and possessive. Billy was like an anchor holding Steve in reality, keeping him here and now, not letting him near the world of monsters and harm.

He wrapped around Billy’s back just like he did in the motel’s tiny bed and felt Billy’s fingers touch the skin of his forearm, Billy’s chest rising and falling underneath.

Another image floated in Steve’s mind, years in the future, holding Billy like this on a warm night, windows thrown open to let in the salty ocean air because *it’s a nice night, baby*.

That night in Hawkins, though, he slept soundly, no nightmares to wake him up in terror. Peace embraced them both.

The clock flipped from 2:59am to 3:00am as they slept. Outside of Steve’s window, a female’s figure, gnarled, grey-skinned, and naked, floated. Watching. Waiting.

3. Chapter 3

Eleven explained it all again the best she could over breakfast.

“So there are three of them?” Billy asked.

“Yes. Three,” she replied before digging into her pancakes.

Jonathan and Hopper worked the stove, making batch after batch of pancakes, scrambled eggs, bacon, and toast. Joyce kept the coffee going and poured glasses of milk and orange juice.

“They want Steve,” she explained. “Want him to join.”

“Like, become one of them?” Steve asked as he crunched into his bacon.

“Become one of them,” she said, nodding.

Sign thy name. I shall guide thy hand. He remembered the voice from the dream. “When I had the nightmare, they wanted me to sign this book. A big, old-looking book.”

“The devil’s book,” Billy said. “Did you even pay attention to *The Crucible*?”

“Yes I did, Billy fucking Proctor, thank you very much.”

“I wonder why they’re so focused on you, though,” Nancy said over her plate.

“Maybe,” Steve swallowed. He hated saying this. The memory made his feel sick. “Maybe they know this is where Barb was taken. My parents weren’t home that night of the party. Maybe they think this is my house.”

Dustin’s head snapped up. “That’s it! They think you’re an ally. They see you as a possible connection between between this world and the Upside Down. In their opinion, if you joined your forces with theirs, you could help them level up.”

“So you pretend,” Mike said. “Pretend to sign it. Maybe sign *Mickey Mouse* or something. That wouldn’t count, would it?”

“No,” Jonathan said. “We don’t know what would happen if he signed, even if it’s a fake name. He should stall.”

“And while he’s stalling,” Max said, “we fuck ‘em up!”

“Maxine, *language*,” Billy said. She rolled her eyes. “But she’s right. We get them while they’re distracted.”

Max’s mouth dropped open and she threw her hands in the air. “It’s like I don’t even *exist*.”

“So, how do you destroy witches?” Nancy asked.

“Water,” Will said. “Like in The Wizard of Oz. Remember? The Wicked Witch of the West.”

“No. You do it with fire,” Lucas said. “Think about it. They used to burn them at the stake.”

“Both of you are wrong,” Billy said as he shoved an entire pancake into his mouth.

Max’s whole face twisted up in disgust. “Fucking *gross*, Billy.”

“What?” he said with a mouthful of pancake. “I’m a growing boy, Maxine.”

Max turned to Steve. “How do you even *like* him?”

Steve shrugged. “He’s not that bad, Max. Like a big damn teddy bear.”

“I’m *not* a fuckin’ teddy bear, Harrington,” Billy said as he shoved a second pancake in his mouth.

Steve reached over and played with Billy’s longer hair in the back, tossing the curls around his fingers. “An *angry* teddy bear.” Billy winked at him.

Will inexplicably started blushing and became very interested in his plate.

“So what’s your big plan then, shithead?” Max asked Billy.

Billy chewed for a several long moments and swallowed, taking a few sips of coffee, grinning widely at Max the whole time. She rolled her eyes again as he sipped slowly. “I still don’t get it,” she said quietly to Steve.

“Teddy bear,” he mouthed at her.

“He’s a spazz. So are you.”

“Anyway,” Billy said loudly, “you hang them. That’s what they did in Salem.” He looked up at Steve. “Sorry for spoiling it. That’s how the play ends. If you don’t count the guy they crushed to death with a stone.”

“So we have to hit them with water, fire, *and* hang them?” Joyce asked.

Hopper finally decided to take control. “Okay, so here’s what we’re gonna do. Joyce, Billy, Jonathan, Nancy and I will each have our weapon from last night. While Steve is signing, or fake signing, we’ll attempt to destroy them first. You all,” he looked pointedly at the younger group, “need to stay the hell back. Now if that doesn’t do it, then you guys will come in with water.”

“Water balloons,” Mike said. Everyone nodded.

Hopper looked around the table. “Then fire.”

“Glass bottles full of gasoline,” Jonathan said. “We can soak the rags in the rubbing alcohol to use them as wicks.”

Hopper looked taken aback. “I don’t wanna know how you know that, kid. But yeah.” He shook his head. “And hanging.”

“Some sort of noose?” Joyce asked quietly with a horrified expression. Everyone seemed quiet and unsettled. Even Billy stopped eating.

"I can do that. Don't worry about it," Hopper said. "El, did they say what time they wanted him?"

"Yes," she said. "Three a.m."

"Three it is," Hopper said. "We have some work to do."

The rest of the morning passed in busy preparation. Joyce ran to grab supplies and groceries. The kids used the tub and sinks to make water balloons. Jonathan and Nancy loaded rags into buckets and dumped the rubbing alcohol over them. Hopper began making lassos from the rope from the garage (*My dad showed me before he drank himself to death*, he'd said quietly to Steve when Steve had asked, and damn, that was a conversation he'd have to have with Hopper another day).

Steve and Billy raided the basement for wine bottles, trying to pick out the least expensive-looking ones but neither really knowing the difference. They hauled them up over to the basin tub in the laundry room to uncork and empty them, deep red liquid swirling around before sinking down the drain.

Steve stayed quiet as he worked, setting aside the empty bottles in a spare laundry basket. He felt a bit nauseous as he watched the blood-colored wine glug from the bottle he held.

"Something on your mind, Harrington?" Billy asked, nudging his shoulder into Steve's.

"Just feeling a little," and he didn't know how to put it into words. Like a blindfolded prisoner standing in front of a firing squad. Like heat lightning was flashing under his skin. Like he might be preparing to march to his death, or maybe even directly into the devil's grasp, you know, no big deal. "Jesus. I don't know."

Billy looked at the label of the bottle he'd just uncorked. "Fuck, this is all in French. But it's from 1961. Looks classy to me. Maybe it'll take the edge off." He thrust the bottle out at Steve.

Steve took it from Billy's hand. "1961 huh?" He placed the opening to his lips and tilted his head back, drinking deep. The taste was not unpleasant. "Better than Boone's Farm, I guess," he said as he wiped

stray drops from his mouth with the back of his hand.

When Billy laughed, his smile reached the corners of his eyes, and in that moment, another image flashed in Steve's mind: Billy with that same smile, lying on a beach, laugh lines at the corners of his eyes, *You're a trip, baby.*

"You know when you laugh, you do it with your eyes, too?" Steve asked, taking one more slug from the bottle before dumping the rest into the sink. "Smiling eyes. It looks good on you. You should do it more often."

Billy reached for another bottle and twisted the corkscrew in it. "1961 makes you really fuckin' sappy, you know that?"

"Don't pretend like you don't love it."

"Not pretending at all," Billy replied as he dumped another bottle.

They stopped when they reached 15 bottles - probably too many, but better safe than sorry. By the time they rejoined everyone, the kids had filled a large box with balloons. Hopper had made several lassos, and Joyce had a pile of sandwiches and chips in the kitchen.

Time, for the rest of the day, seemed to vacillate between dragging with intense silence, pregnant with nervous energy, and flying by with rapid raucousness. Dustin produced VHS cassettes of all three Star Wars films from his backpack, and the kids argued loudly throughout each one. Hopper grilled hamburgers for dinner. The sun descended, and nervous chatter filled the house. Steve's heart started to sink as he endured side glances accompanied by sad smiles.

As the hour grew late, a few of them picked a different album to play in the living room, the stereo turned up as loud as it could go. People sang along at different places, dancing fast, silly, bopping into each other, and sometimes they slow danced: Hopper with Joyce, Mike with Eleven, Lucas with Max, Jonathan with Nancy. Jonathan played Buzzcocks and The Ramones. Nancy chose Journey and The Police. Hopper played Rolling Stones. Dustin dropped the needle on Billy Joel.

Steve fully expected Billy to pull out the Metallica or Led Zeppelin. When his turn finally arrived (he insisted on going last), he said, "I only have one song for you, King Steve. Not usually my taste. Just so you know."

The needle fell, and there was the sound of soft static as Steve waited. The unmistakable arrangement of guitar, synthesizer and drums of David Bowie's *Heroes* poured through the speakers.

"Okay," Hopper said, eyes on the clock. 2:30am. "Let's get ready." Around them, everyone set into motion, pulling on and zipping up jackets, picking up boxes and weapons, toting it all outside.

Billy and Steve stood still in the living room, facing each other, close, neither moving, neither speaking for long moments.

"Heroes. Just for one day, Harrington," Billy said.

Bowie's voice grew more desperate in the song, nearly shouting. *Oh we can beat them, forever and ever.*

Steve nodded. "Just for one day."

Billy looked at him, the song pounding around them, nervous energy making Steve feel like he was vibrating. "You'll be fine," Billy said, and Steve wasn't sure if he was talking to himself or to Steve.

"Yeah. I will." Steve thought about reaching out, but his hands stayed frozen at his sides.

"What do you say we go kick some witch ass, huh?" Billy asked with gleaming eyes.

Steve nodded to the back door. "After you, teddy bear."

"I'll let you have that one, pretty boy."

Billy grinned wide as he picked up the machete from the kitchen counter. "Whoo! Yeah!" he bellowed as he exited the back door, startling Mike next to him. "Let's fuck some shit *up*!"

Max rolled her eyes from the other side of the pool. "Ugh. *Lame*".

When Steve walked through the back door, the kids rushed him, squeezing the life out of him as he was encompassed by a mass of hugs. “Okay guys, *Jesus*,” he said, full of happy exasperation.

Jonathan gave him an awkward hug, followed by Nancy’s delicate embrace. Joyce was all warmth with hands on his face with a hushed, “Be safe, honey.”

They formed two lines as they had last night, the adults and older teenagers up front and the kids in the back. Steve ditched his bat at the place where he stood, deciding that he needed to appear before them weaponless. They got about five feet from the poolside toward the forest before Eleven said, “Everyone. Stop.” She looked at Steve. “Just you.”

“You’re staying here?” He sincerely hoped the panic he felt wasn’t apparent in his voice.

She nodded. “Only you.” She looked forward into the line of trees.

“Okay,” Steve said shakily. He missed his bat already. “Okay.”

He walked forward carefully, slowly, and thought the isolated crunch of only his own two feet in the snow sounded even louder than they had when he walked with everyone else.

He made it about ten feet before Billy shouted, “Harrington, WAIT.” Billy shoved his machete at Hopper, who took it, confused, as Billy bounded forward in the snow toward Steve.

Billy didn’t stop until he was in Steve’s space, hands gripping Steve’s jacket and pulling him forward against his lips, kissing Steve hard and fierce.

“Gross,” Mike said.

“Cute,” Eleven said.

“Ugh,” Max said.

“Wait. What?” Dustin said.

“Wow,” Will said.

“You owe me five dollars,” Jonathan said to Nancy.

Joyce smiled. Hopper looked at the snow on his boots.

Steve kissed Billy back, firm and desperate, taking Billy’s face between his hands as he changed the angle. Billy made a sound, a huffed “mm” in his throat and licked Steve’s bottom lip. Steve parted his lips, and Billy’s tongue touched his once, twice, before retreating. Billy pulled back and touched his forehead to Steve’s. “Come back to me, pretty boy.”

Steve nodded and kissed the tip of Billy’s nose. “Be back before you know it.”

Billy hovered for a few seconds before breaking away and returning to Hopper’s side, retrieving his machete.

“Nice,” Jonathan said from Billy’s left side, giving Billy a high five.

“So fucking weird,” Max said.

Steve turned to the face the forest again. He walked forward, toward the trees standing like dark ghosts in the night.

Suddenly, three figures appeared at the base of one of the trees. They were hideous, hunched creatures with greyish-brown skin, gnarled and bowed, naked. Stringy grey hair hung in patchy strands on their heads.

“Dost thou come to sign thy name?” One of them hissed.

Steve heard movement behind him, heard tentative steps forward as pairs of feet came just a little closer. “Yes,” Steve said. “I do.”

“Thy name shall grant us entrance to the other side,” another one hissed as it crawled toward Steve. “We shall live like kings and queens with thy aide.”

He heard Nancy cock her rifle and Joyce do the same with her pistol.

“Thou art a king in this world,” said the third one. “We came upon thee with thy subjects dancing and drinking ale, reveling by thy bathing pool. *King Steve*, they said to thee. Thou dost have great influence. Thy hand shall guide us to the other side.”

“Yeah,” Steve said. “King Steve. That’s right.” His heart beat in his throat. Snow crunched behind him, closer still. “I am a King, and this is my kingdom. I’ll help you. Let me sign.”

Three knobby hands waved, and an ancient volume appeared in front of him, tattered, yellowed, and peeling. Next to it floated a long quill inside of a black ink pot. Steve took the quill and dipped it a few times.

“Why don’t you come closer and watch? I mean, this is a big moment. You should be here to witness,” he said as he held up the dripping quill. They crawled closer, limbs long and crooked like spider legs, their bodies moving grotesquely.

“Do it,” said the one closest, right by Steve’s elbow. “Sign his book.”

Steve held the quill close to the page, and the witch by his elbow leaned in just a touch more. He spun as quickly as he could and planted the quill in its eye. It released a piercing shriek, then everything happened quickly.

Joyce, Nancy and Hopper fired on the other two. One of the two slumped to the forest floor, unmoving, but the bullets had missed the other, and it reared, screaming a piercing wail. It waved its hand and guns wrenched and flew out of their hands.

At the same time, Billy bounded up to the witch with the quill in its eye. Its shriek rose as Billy hacked into its side once, twice, pulling his machete back and using his third strike to lop its head off of its shoulders. Black blood spurted in pulses from its neck over the snow on the forest floor.

Eleven stepped forward, her hand outstretched, her gaze intent as she pinned the last witch against a tree trunk. Blood trickled from Eleven’s nose. Dustin, Lucas, and Will launched water balloons; three of them struck and nothing happened. Jonathan, Nancy, and Max lit

rags dangling from two bottles each and tossed them. Two bottles slammed against the forest floor, flames spreading out over the snow, an odd sight. The other four smashed directly on the witch. Flame wrapped wrapped around it, engulfing it, but it simply cackled, and the flames disappeared with a whoosh.

Hopper spun and threw a lasso; its loop sank around the witch's neck and he pulled, tugging, struggling against the rope. Jonathan and Nancy stepped in behind him and grabbed the rope, adding their own weight. The witch whispered a sibilant word and the rope snapped. They all fell backward into the snow.

Billy ran forward, shouted, "Die, you fuckin' *bitch*," and sank the machete into its chest. A shocked look crossed its face before black blood splattered out from its mouth once, then dribbled over its chin. A sickening gurgle came from his chest.

The book disappeared. The three bodies vanished before them.

Billy ran quickly over to Steve, grabbing his arms, touching his chest, his face, his neck, frantic, panicked. "You - are you okay?"

"Fine. Hey. Hey. Billy. Look. I'm okay. See?" Steve held up his arms and turned around.

Billy grabbed Steve's arms again and pulled him in close, hugging him tight, face buried against Steve's neck. He choked out a sob and Steve felt Billy's weight give, his knees buckling. Steve went with him, kneeling, holding each other in the snow.

The others started to back off, returning to the house one by one. Steve's eyes slid closed as he lost himself in Billy's embrace, pulling back to kiss him, this time gentle. Soft. Tender.

"Eleven," he heard Hopper say behind them. "Come on. Give them some space."

Steve looked back to see her standing and watching them with a little smile.

"Better together," she said, and turned to take her place by Hopper's side.

They used whatever energy they have left to tidy up; everyone agreed that Mr. and Mrs. Harrington probably shouldn't come home to find a dozen Molotov cocktails in their backyard. Hopper threw the garbage in his Blazer to tote away.

Steve decided that if they noticed the missing wine bottles, he'd admit that he had a party and had raided the cellar, then take whatever punishment they decided to give out - though with a cellar of that size, he doubted they'd ever notice.

Before they went to bed, they gathered in the kitchen. "We won't tell," Max said. "None of us will. About any of this." She looked pointedly between Billy and Steve.

"Thanks, Max," Billy said. "There are people who might not like it," he said as he took Steve's hand.

Hopper looked irritated as hell, but kept silent.

The exhaustion of the evening overtook them, and they all made their way to their bedrooms.

Billy was all over Steve before he could even shut his bedroom door. While he kissed Steve, his hands were everywhere, on Steve's face, sliding over his chest and stomach, over his back and ass, and then repeated the whole thing until removing clothes became far more important. Hurriedly they shucked their sweatshirts, jeans, and socks.

Billy broke the kiss to look down when Steve's jeans hit the floor. "Seriously?" he said at Steve's long johns.

"It's winter in Indiana. Come on, Cali boy, you need to learn how to stay *warm*."

"Off," Billy hissed, pointing at them.

And fine - if Billy wanted them off, Steve was going to put on a show. He walked backward until the backs of his legs hit the bed, teasing the waistband of his thermals and his briefs down just a bit, letting

his hipbones peek out. Billy licked his lips. Steve slid them down lower, slowly, letting the top of his cock show.

Billy had had enough, apparently, and closed the distance between them. "We don't have *time* for this, baby," he said, and he kissed Steve messily, his tongue touching Steve's as he slid his hand under the back of Steve's waistband and palmed his ass. He shoved Steve back onto the bed and dropped to his knees, tugging Steve's thermals and briefs down and off.

Steve's cock tapped against Billy's cheek when it sprung free, and *fuck* if that wasn't the hottest thing Steve had ever seen. Billy leaned forward and caressed his other cheek against it before taking it in his mouth, sucking down halfway before sliding up, over and over. "Fuck, *Billy*," Steve said, and slid his hand in Billy's hair. Billy hummed and sucked harder, took his dick further into his mouth, apparently pleased. Steve tried giving a little tug in Billy's hair, and Billy hummed again, reaching down to stroke his own cock.

It wasn't long before Steve felt his release building. "Billy," he panted, trying to warn him. "Billy I'm gonna," but then Billy took him down to the hilt. Steve fisted his sheets and came, Billy swallowing up everything, pulling off to place a kiss to the shaft. He bent down again to lick up a droplet of come that formed on the tip of Steve's dick.

"Jesus," Steve whispered. "Fucking Christ, Billy. You're gonna kill me."

"No, pretty boy," Billy said as he pulled up onto the bed with Steve. They laid next to each other and Billy kissed him long and lazy, tasting like Steve's come. "I'm gonna save you."

Steve grabbed his lube from the nightstand, slicked up his hand and reached down to close it over Billy's cock and stroked until Billy touched his forehead to Steve's, panting "Baby, baby," coming over Steve's hand and his thigh.

They cleaned up lazily and Steve wrapped around Billy's back. "I'll save you every damn time," Billy said in the moments before they fell asleep.

Four hours felt like fifteen minutes when Steve opened his eyes to the sunlight streaming in his window, little particles flitting in and out in its brightness. Billy stirred next to him and Steve kissed him into consciousness. “Mmm,” Billy said, carding his fingers through Steve’s hair. “I wish every morning could start like this.”

Steve played with a stray curl on Billy’s shoulder. “Don’t see why it can’t. Someday.”

Billy pressed his lips to Steve’s. “I like the way you dream, pretty boy.”

The house stirred around them: boys were arguing in the hall, Nancy and Max giggled nearby, and the delicious smell of coffee and bacon wafted upstairs.

They dressed and joined the thrum of the household, joining everyone for breakfast. Billy’s foot touched Steve’s under the table. They shared a smile, small and secret.

Nancy took Mike, Dustin, and Lucas with her when she left, followed closely by Joyce, Jonathan, and Will. When Hopper and Eleven walked to the door, she stopped in the open doorway to turn and regard them both. “Cute,” she said.

“Leave them alone kid. Let’s go,” Hopper said. He looked over at Steve. “Call me if you need anything, okay?”

“Yeah, Hop. Thanks for everything.”

“You did good. Both of you,” he said, and climbed up into the Blazer. El waved from the passenger window, and they waved back.

Max stood behind them in the living room. “Are we going, too?” she asked Billy.

Billy looked at Steve. “Not till he’s done with his English work.”

Steve was taken aback. “Seriously? We haven’t had enough of

witches this weekend?”

“You need to get that grade up in English, baby,” Billy said as he caressed the side of Steve’s face.

“*Ugh*,” Max said as she stomped into the kitchen. “So gross.”

~*~

Billy coached Steve through his last set of work, and Steve was grateful that they skimmed the text instead of doing a close reading like they’d done for the first two acts. He was tired and really, *really* fucking sick of witches.

“You know, if they want some tips on how to rid the world of witches, I hear that machetes are a pretty good way to go,” Steve said as he packed up his work into his English folder.

“On real witches? Sure,” Billy said as he leaned over to steal a kiss from Steve’s lips. “These people were just vengeful asswipes, though.”

“Should we tell them that there really are witches in the world?” Steve asked as he kissed Billy again.

Billy went for one more. “Let’s not get crazy now, Harrington.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, teddy bear.”

“*Still* not a fuckin’ teddy bear.”

“Are.”

“I think I know what he’s giving you for Valentine’s Day,” Max shouted in the other room.

“Fuck you, Maxine!”

~*~

The next morning at school, Steve pulled up next to Billy standing next to his Camaro in the parking lot, smoking a cigarette. Steve had

worried all night about what kind of repercussions Billy might face at his father's hands, and at first glance, Billy appeared to be okay - no visible marks or bruises, at least. But then again, it seemed as though Billy's father had made an art form out of hiding his abuse.

"Hey baby," Billy said as Steve climbed out of his car. He glanced to see if anyone one was around and leaned in for a quick kiss. Steve leaned back against his car.

"Hey," Steve said, and took a second to palm Billy's ass since no one was watching.

Billy placed a hand next to Steve on the car, standing in front of him. "So the weirdest fuckin' thing happened yesterday."

"Besides murdering creatures in the woods."

"Yeah besides that, smartass."

"Sorry. Continue."

Billy took a drag from his cigarette. "Max and I got home about 2pm, and what did I see parked in my driveway but a Chevy Blazer."

"Hop was at your house?"

Billy nodded. "He came strolling out with Eleven. I thought I was dreaming. They stopped in front of us and Hop goes, 'Welp, that asshole won't be bothering you anymore,' and had this giant shit-eating grin on his face."

"Did he arrest him?"

"Nope," Billy said. "But Eleven gave me that look, you know the one, with her big brown eyes and cute little smile and I just *know* that little shit shook him up somehow. Max and I went in, and he didn't say one fuckin' word. I mean, not one. Susan asked Max how her weekend was at the Byers' and Max said she had a blast and started making shit up about watching Star Wars and playing Dungeons and Dragons, but Neil didn't even *look* in my *direction*. All night. Not once. It was like the fuckin' Twilight Zone."

Steve smiled and touched the side of Billy's face. "From what I hear, she has a knack for putting assholes in their place."

"Shit," Billy said as he finished off his cigarette, taking one last puff before throwing the butt to the ground and grinding it with his boot. "Remind me to buy her ice cream or something."

"Eggos," Steve said as he pushed off of the car, leading them toward the school. "She likes Eggos."

~*~

Mrs. Moore looked at the last of the work Steve had handed in after the bell rang. "Great job, Mr. Harrington," she said. "I'm pleased to see you were able to catch up. And thank you for helping him, Billy," she said.

"No problem, ma'am," he said, his charm falling somewhere in the middle between addressing an old librarian and total lechery.

"Ah," she said as she flipped through Steve's papers. "You rewrote the essay. Very good." Her brows furrowed a little. "Interesting title, though. *There Be Witches*."

"Yeah," Steve said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I think there are, but I talk about the story, too. You'll see."

She gave a small smile. "I look forward to it. Thank you, gentlemen."

"You're a decent tutor," Steve said as they exited class, "you know that?"

"Only for the pretty ones," Billy said, nudging Steve's side.

They walked down the hall and into the throng of students, surrounded by laughter, shouting, and silliness. Billy and Steve found themselves thrown back into it all, sliding back into a life where they could laugh, shout, and be silly. They didn't forget what they saw in the woods that weekend, and they certainly weren't done fighting monsters, but then February fell into March and March into April, the snow melted as green unfurled around them and all the stranger

things took a back seat.

Graduation loomed close. They went to parties; they took care of each other when one of them drank too much. They shared Steve's bed on nights when his parents were out of town, nights filled with sweat and sex and love.

They went to prom, *we're going stag together*, they told everyone. Somehow that was the coolest thing; everyone thought that was *fucking awesome* and no one questioned it, two kings of the school hanging out together. They took a prom photo together, Steve standing behind Billy in the practiced prom pose, his arms around Billy's waist and Billy's arms on top of Steve's. Laughter was on their lips as the photo snapped and Steve leaned down to plant a kiss on Billy's cheek, and everyone loved that, too.

Steve held Billy close after he'd made love to Billy for the first time on prom night, and yeah, maybe that was a fucking cliché, but Steve wouldn't have done it any other way.

Billy looked gorgeous and freshly debauched, his head lying on Steve's chest as Steve played with his hair. "Remember back in February when I played Heroes for you?"

"Mmhmm."

"I'm glad it was more than just for one day," Billy said, trailing his fingers through the hair leading down from Steve's navel.

"You know what else Bowie said in that song?" Steve asked, and Billy looked up.

Steve pulled Billy up and kissed him, long and deep, as though nothing could fall. "He said we could beat them forever and ever."

Billy looked a little dazed. "Yeah?"

"You know, a while back my dad kept pushing college at me so I just applied to a bunch of places just to shut him up. Starting getting letters. So it turns out I have some choices," Steve ran his fingers along Billy's arm. "How does UCLA sound?"

Billy pressed a kiss to Steve's lips. "Let's go home, pretty boy."

~*~

In their bedroom in California, decades later, Steve opened the windows. "It's a nice night, baby," Billy had said. Steve rejoined Billy in bed and pulled him close, burying his nose in blond and grey hair. On the wall where it had hung for years was a black framed photo. In it, on their prom night, Steve pressed a kiss to Billy's cheek, Billy's head thrown back in laughter.

Notes for the Chapter:

This was truly a labor of love. I hope you enjoyed it.

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We can be heroes. Forever and ever.

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